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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: CREEPING CONSERVATISM HITS HOTELS DURING RAMADAN

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Summary

1. (SBU) Bahrain's Tourism Directorate issued instructions to five-star hotels in early October directing them to stop serving alcohol in their bars and restaurants during the holy month of Ramadan, an unprecedented development. Compliance was spotty at first but by mid-month all hotels had implemented the order following threats of closure. Hotel general managers downplayed any impact on their business, saying that Ramadan is always a slow period for business travelers and tourists. A government contact said the Tourism Directorate took the decision under pressure from, and in consultation with, Islamist parliamentarians. Liberal columnists condemned the move, saying it was moving Bahrain "back in time to the dark ages." The government may have calculated that banning the bottle during Ramadan was a relatively low-cost way to appease the Islamists. End Summary.

Ramadan Kareem - Close the Bars

2. (SBU) The Ministry of Information's Tourism Directorate issued a directive in early October just days before the advent of the month of Ramadan, which started in Bahrain on October 4, instructing five-star hotels not to serve alcohol in their bars and restaurants during the holy month. According to our contacts, this was the first time five-star hotels were barred from serving alcohol during Ramadan, bringing them into line with all other hotels, restaurants, and bars on the island.

3. (SBU) Hotels' compliance with the order was spotty at best during the first few days of the month. A Ministry of Information contact told us most hotels ignored the order, and the Tourism Directorate had to issue two additional directives, the second of which included the threat that the government would force the hotel to close temporarily if it continued to serve alcohol. Visitors staying at hotels, including Embassy TDYers, confirmed that hotels closed their bars practically in mid-drink one evening about two weeks into Ramadan.

4. (SBU) Hotel general managers confirmed that the Tourism Directorate advised them several times to stop serving in the bars and restaurants, though they continued to stock mini-bars in the rooms. The GMs downplayed any impact the bottle ban had on business, but noted that some hotels were forced to furlough bar and restaurant staff, almost all of whom are expats. One manager admitted that the normal flow of Westerners coming from Saudi Arabia to Bahrain on weekends had slowed.

Pressure from Islamist MPs

5. (SBU) The Information Ministry contact said that the Ministry took the decision under pressure from Islamist parliamentarians. The Ministry included MPs in the policy formation process before issuing the directive. He commented that the impact on tourism and business travel would likely be light because the number of these types of visitors drops each Ramadan anyway.

Columnists Accuse Government of Caving

6. (SBU) Columnists Abdulla Al Ayoubi and Abdul Moneim Ibrahim from Arabic daily Akhbar Al Khaleej and Saeed Al Hamad from Arabic daily Al Ayam have written several articles condemning the government's decision to ban alcohol, accusing the government of caving in to demands of Islamist deputies. Al Ayoubi wrote on October 26 that Bahrain "is transforming into a new Taliban regime." He believes the government is being too cautious with "religious radicals who are taking us back in time to the dark ages." He added that business

people do not choose to invest in a climate dominated by religious radicalism and restrictions on personal freedoms. In an October 26 column, Ibrahim mocked Islamist politicians' demands that Bahrain host only "clean tourism," asking what detergent the country should use to be certain that all tourists are clean.

17. (SBU) MP Mohammed Khalid, an aggressive Sunni Islamist politician, hit back at the columnists in an article posted in several Bahraini chatrooms. He accused them of waging a campaign against Islamic deputies and defended promoting alcohol-free tourism in Bahrain, saying the country should not rely on alcohol to attract tourists.

Comment

18. (SBU) The Ramadan alcohol ban is the first major manifestation of the influence of Islamist deputies on Bahrain's traditional openness and tolerance since the early 2004 decisions to protest the musical concert of a Lebanese pop star and to close down an Arab satellite reality TV program in which young men and women shared a common house. The government may have calculated that banning alcohol during Ramadan, traditionally a slow period for tourist and business travel, was a low-cost way to appease the Islamists.

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